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The treatment of history in Girish Karnad's Taledanda highlights the socio-political conflicts of contemporary Indian society

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Abstract

Girish Karnad, one of the foremost Indian modern playwrights, gets the country's highest literary recognition for his contributions to modern Indian drama. Tale-danda deals with the two decades ending in AD 1168; in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna gathered an assembly of poets, mystics, philosophers and social revolutionaries. The caste system is presented as a bloodshed policy in this play. Sovideva made intrigue to create a rift between his father, Bijjali and Basavanna to become a king and to oust Basavanna from the court by accusing him of misuse of the treasury. The inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin bride and a cobbler bridegroom draws the bloodshed and disaster in the lives of sharanas in Kalyan. By fusing these two different stories into one, Karnad tries to highlight the contemporary socio-political conflicts of our society, like the Mandir and Mandal conflict. This paper attempts to study the social and political conflicts to highlight the present time issues.

Keywords: Mystics, caste system, inter caste marriage, bloodshed, Mandir and Mandal conflict, intrigue, rift, treasury etc.

Introduction

Girish Karnad, one of the foremost Indian modern playwrights, gets the country's highest literary recognition for his contributions to modern Indian drama. His plays received worldwide acclaim and recognition because of his ability to universalise the individual and social predicament through the medium of drama. The roots of his plays are Indian mythology and history. Through the past, he represents the present issues like socio-political conflict, religious controversy, caste-system, religio-political conflict, etc. At the same time, his plays convey a strong and unmistakable Western philosophical sensibility. "*Tale-danda goes back in time to uncover the history of the majority religion (Hinduism) turning against itself*" (Collected Plays X). Tale-danda is acutely reflective of the contemporary socio-political events, especially the Nehruvian era of disillusionment as well as the aftermath of the Mandal Commission Report and of the demolition of Babri Masjid over Ram Janma Bhoomi. The play compels us to sit up and think about the age-old Varna problem and look for some solutions.

Karnad takes the legendary or historical figures that are able to carry his message of representing the present society. He artistically links up the past and the present with the help of legendary or historical figures like King Bijjali or Basavanna and relates them to hold a contemporary relevance. Commenting his plays, Kirtinath Kurtoki has said "*Karnad's plays are thoroughly modern in outlook or spirit*" (rjoe 138-139).

Karnad's *Tale-danda* is a historical play. It deals with the two decades ending in AD 1168; in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna gathered an assembly of poets, mystics, philosophers and social revolutionaries. Together they formed an age odd in the history of Karnataka for its creativity, courageous questioning and social responsibility. Spurning Sanskrit, they spoke of God and man in the mother-tongue of the familiar people. They reproached idolatry and temple worship. Indeed, they deserted anything 'static' in favour of the principle of movement and betterment in a human corporation. They acknowledged the equality of sexes and honoured hard and devoted work. They resisted the caste system, not just in theory but in practice. This last act brought down upon them the outrage of the orthodox. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed.

Karnad relates this past incident with the present and through the past he tries to lit the terror and orthodoxy of the present society, as he himself said in the Preface of the play –

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“I wrote ‘Tale-danda’ in 1989 when the ‘Mandir’ and the ‘Mandal’ movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered” (Karnad. Preface).

In this play, there are two main threads of history:

- 1) Sovideva’s intrigue to create a rift between his father, Bijjali and Basavanna. Sovideva incarcerated his father to become the king, and later his father was killed by Jagadeva. Sovideva’s mind was poisoned by the evil counsellors, Damodhar Bhat, Manchankramit to oust Basavanna from the court by accusing him of misuse of the treasury. On the other hand, we witness the same incidents in contemporary India, where a brother betrays another brother, a son betrays his father. In politics, all the politicians are evil counsellors. They intrigue one another to come into power, and because of these politicians, the familiar people lost their lives like the bloodshed in Kalyan.
- 2) The inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin bride and a cobbler bridegroom draws the bloodshed and disaster in the lives of sharanas in Kalyan. Likewise, in contemporary India, the low-caste people are not allowed to get married to the higher-caste people. Even the lower caste people are not allowed to get entry into the temple of higher caste people. They cannot stand hand to hand in any religious festivals. The lower caste people are still discriminated against as inferior in the 21st century. Although India is started calling as digital, the thinking of the people is still the same, orthodox, not digital.

Caste-system is the most vital social issue in this play. The Brahmin or upper-class Hindu thinks caste system as an ideal system for society. They would not tolerate the violation of the caste system, like inter-caste marriage, the upper caste or lower caste people touching each other, eating or living together. But over time, there is a freedom to choose a profession, but not life partners, because the people have not been able to liberate themselves from the idea of caste and creed, and it remains an integral part of present Indian society.

In the play's very first scene, we come across the evils of the caste system and how badly they were followed by the people of those days. Jagadeva, a Brahmin by birth, brings his friend, Mallibomma, a tanner, a low caste, with him to see his bedridden father. Although both are sharanas Mallibomma hesitates to enter Jagadeva's house because of his low birth, and Jagadeva keeps forcing him to enter. Afterwards, we learn how Bhagirathi cautions Mallibomma about his low caste. The following conversation reveals this-

JAGADEVA: Come in.

MALLIBOMMA: Don't be silly. I shouldn't have even stepped into this Brahmin Street. And you want me to come into your house? No, thank you.

JAGADEVA: Come on. Let's show them.

MALLIBOMMA: You go in now. I'd better return home, too.

JAGADEVA: That won't do. You must come in. Don't be afraid. I'm here. Come on!

(He starts dragging Mallibomma by his arm. Mallibomma resists.)

(Karnad 02)

The second scene reveals the inferiority of the king. Although Bijjali is the king, he is a barber by birth, a lower-caste; he feels inferior, despite being a king. The following statement reveals this-

“One’s caste is like the skin on one’s body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber-a shepherd-a scavenger! (Karnad 14-15)”

In the marriage episode, we witness the most evil and ugly face of the caste system. The sharanas Madhuvarasa, a Brahmin and Haralayal, a cobbler, decide to get married to their children. In those days, it is an unthinkable subject, and the Brahmins see it as a violation of their ideal system. Madhuvarasa and Haralayal decide because they are sharanas, not Brahmin or cobbler. They meet Basavanna to seek his permission. And here we see the wonder, happiness, fear, hesitation and contemplation of Basavanna. Although he lit the light of eradication of the Varnashrama system, he fears because he foresees the consequence of the marriage, and he is happy because he never thought that his ideals would come so fast to reality. Since it has been a simple theory and how it will be plasticized through this marriage, he also contemplates the future of the couple.

BASAVANNA: Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this – this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of varnashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads (Ibid. 38).

The play is a luminous illustration of Game of power-politics. Everyone attempts to assert himself at the cost of humanity and brotherhood. In the very first scene, we witness Jagadeva, who abandons his old parents to chase his political career.

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